

Spreading God's Fire in Australia

The Olympic flame is not the only fire burning Down Under. Spirit-filled churches are growing and gaining national attention.

by: Adrian Brooks and Paul Gallagher

Ask an Australian what revival is all about, and he's not likely to start describing all-night tent meetings or Christian conferences. Although churches Down Under have experienced jolts of revival in recent years, few examples would match the American definition of the word.

But something is stirring on this island continent, a place that will be in the world's spotlight this month when the Olympic Games begin in Sydney on Sept. 15. Christianity is affecting every level of society, attracting media attention and even extending to the political arena, as evidenced in the 1999 election of John Anderson—a born-again Christian who landed the country's second-highest office, deputy prime minister.

It's a quiet revival, without the tent meetings. But as the Olympic torch burns, the flames of this revival are inspiring Australians to step forward and influence their nation in the power of Christ.

One case in point was birthed in tragedy last July. The town of Childers, located in the northeast tropical state of Queensland, was rocked by the mass murder of 15 backpackers from overseas, who died when an arsonist allegedly set fire to their hostel. A murderous rampage of this proportion was a

tremendous blow to the citizens of Australia, a nation of only 18 million people.

David Marshall, the pastor of Childers Christian Family church, was quick to respond to the needs of his community after the killings. He and his colleagues in a local ministerial fellowship organized a prayer meeting in a local church and followed up wherever they could with support to those in the community who needed it. The full-house attendance inspired people well beyond the four walls of the church building.

Strangers approached Marshall in the street to thank him for the service. One emergency worker told him, "You guys [the ministers of the town] are going to have to get beside us now," adding that his co-workers in emergency relief needed more "spiritual input" in their lives. David's reply was simply: "That's our aim. That's why I'm here."

This is a typical case of how revival is being played out in Australia. It is nothing spectacular, perhaps, but it is life-changing nonetheless. And it is happening across the county, reaching to the highest political and cultural echelons of society.

David Cartledge, Ph.D., a highly regarded leader in Australian Pentecostalism and president of the Assemblies of God's Southern Cross College in Sydney, points to a different heritage Down Under than that experienced in the United States.

"Australia is culturally different to America, and the similarities are quite superficial," he told Charisma. "We

don't have the religious heritage that America has, and therefore do not have the dominant evangelical influence that American Christianity has."

Cartledge notes that when people think of Christianity in Australia, it is generally Catholic or Anglican, "despite the fact their attendance is minimal," he says. But these are the roots of Christianity in Australia. While the Southern Baptist Convention may rank as the largest denomination in the United States, the number of evangelicals in Australia is small.

"What we are seeing is a massive shift in church attendance from the established denominations to the Pentecostals," Cartledge explains. In fact, in the last 20 years Pentecostals have grown from almost nothing to become the largest church-attending group in the nation, according to a report commissioned by the national Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs.

In total, Pentecostals have grown from about 15,000 people in 1979 to more than 250,000 in 1999. That is a multiplication of more than 16.5 times in 20 years and, in the words of missions strategist C. Peter Wagner, is "virtually unprecedented anywhere in the world."

The number of churches in Australia is also rapidly rising. Car

tledge points out that the number of Pentecostal churches from 1979 to 1999 has grown from about 300 to more than 2,000.

Keith Ainge is a colleague of Cartledge's in the Assemblies of God (AG). As national ministries director for the denomination, he points to the position the church is taking

in the nation. "If revival is defined by influence and growth of churches, it is more obvious," he notes.

Keith says the "power brokers" of Australian society are beginning to recognize the influence of Pentecostal and charismatic churches, and he predicts the next 20 years will see a shift in the power base of the church. He points to the example of Hillsong Church, pastored by Brian Houston, who is president of both the AG in Australia and the Australian Christian Churches (ACC)—a newly formed national Pentecostal umbrella group.

Houston was asked to preach at a November 1998 service commemorating the opening of the federal parliament and was also on the cover of the April 11, 2000, edition of The Bulletin—Australia's equivalent to Newsweek. The story suggested, in secular terms, that it is now hip in Australia to know Jesus.

Mal Fletcher, an Australian church leader living in Europe and founder of Next Wave International—a ministry to Europe's contemporary cultures through mass media and citywide outreach events—is excited to witness God's work in his homeland.

"The most exciting development in Australia at present is that the church is beginning to focus more on influence in society than on revival in the narrow, 'phenomenal' sense of the word," he explains. "That is not to say that Australia has not benefited greatly from manifestations of the Holy Spirit. We thank God for those.

"The focus of church leadership is, however, more on reforming the world through long-term strategies for evangelism, church

planting and equipping people for influence rather than on short-term revival thinking. Church leaders are seeing that revival is an awakening of the church more than an awakening in the world. The church is awakened to influence.”

One of the best examples of Aussie Christians influencing society is Hillsong Church, located in the coastal city of Sydney. Honored around the world for its vibrant praise music, the 10,000-member congregation is much more than a center of inspired worship. Led by Brian Houston, Hillsong has a citywide strategy for outreach.

The vision of Hillsong, says Houston, is outreach, and he quotes Isaiah 61 as his church’s theme: “‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor and heal the brokenhearted.’” This, he stresses, is an outward-looking verse. Aussie Christians, he says, must take revival outside the confines of church.

“It’s got to be translated into effectively reaching people,” Houston says. “If we just turn revival back on ourselves it becomes an introspective thing—it becomes ‘my’ blessing. It has to be outward, and as long as it stays outward I think we can really see the Holy Spirit move long term and see Him do something powerful in the nation.”

Hillsong has two main worship centers: one in inner-city Sydney, the other in the semirural Hills district to the northwest. A number of satellite churches link up in strategic locations across the city. And together, a heavy emphasis is placed on community services that extend the network.

The church has several medical centers, provides family

counseling and employs community-based doctors, psychologists, financial experts and other professionals to help people in need. Marriage counseling, crisis counseling and drug rehabilitation are available.

“Rather than the old concept of standing on street corners and shouting, we’re concentrating on trying to build into the community,” Houston stresses. And the results are incredible: Some 200 people come to Christ at Hillsong every weekend—in a city of 4 million.

On a national level, Houston sees strong leadership as the key to a

dynamic, revivalist church. And he’s not alone. Under the umbrella of the ACC, like-minded leaders are embracing the things that unite them rather than stumbling over those that divide.

Mark Conner, senior pastor of Waverley Christian Fellowship in Melbourne, Australia, is excited to be a member of the ACC movement. “The formation of the ACC is evidence of a growing sense of unity among a number of the Pentecostal churches in Australia,” he explains. “I believe networks of Christians and churches working together, such as the ACC, can help

unify the church in its mission and contribute to the spread of revival throughout the nation.”

Touching Heaven, Changing Earth

But Aussies are showing that you don’t have to be under banners such as the ACC to promote unity. Andrew Naylor—a

Melbourne music director of the highly regarded Christian City Churches (CCC) movement and a key figure behind the Seam of Gold music label—makes that clear when he speaks of the Hillsong team. Although Seam of Gold and Hillsong are separate music labels, Hillsong invites him to attend their annual conference, and he does likewise.

He notes that Darlene Zschech, Hills Christian Life Centre's worship pastor, is changing the world through her popular recordings and praise choruses, the most famous of which is "Shout to the Lord." "She's a worshiper of God," Naylor says. "Worshippers of God are changing the world."

Phil Pringle, a Sydney-based pastor and president of the CCC, reports that CCC has planted some 80 churches in Australia since it started in 1980. "Many churches in Australia have now passed the 500-people mark," he told Charisma. "A church of this number was considered huge 20 years ago; however, there are now close to 200 such churches."

Pringle goes right to the core of the stirrings Down Under: "This Australian revival is great because it is based in the local church," he says. "Churches are not waiting for an evangelist or a revivalist to come to town for souls to be saved but rather, every week, people are coming to Christ through the ministry of the believers and the local church."

And this includes a wave of teen-agers who are finding Christ through such ministries as Youth Alive. Youth Alive and other similar youth movements are reaching thousands of young people. Sydney CCC employs one young man full time, Brock Tamasi, just to preach in high schools. He regularly leads 30 to 50 high-schoolers to Christ every week.

“One young Muslim was opposing the preaching and didn’t believe anything being said,” Pringle says. “Brock invited him forward for prayer. The young man was knocked to the ground by the power of God and immediately received Christ, right in the classroom.”

Pringle points out that there are now hundreds of students in ministry training across the nation. He reports that 16 Bible colleges have started in Australia this year alone. But there’s still a long way to go.

“Much of the church is in trouble in Australia,” says Keith Ainge, national ministries director for the AG. “The major denominations are in decline with a number predicting a bleak future.”

At the same time, theologically conservative churches are growing. The Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church is reported to be the largest evangelical diocese in the world. While not charismatic, it is conservative in its interpretation of Scripture. And though the Anglican Church as a whole is severely declining in numbers, the Sydney diocese is growing.

Ainge believes the future of the church in Australia is conservative evangelical and charismatic. But pastor Mark Conner of Waverley Christian Fellowship in Melbourne adds a challenge to that prediction.

“The Bible is God’s Word. Our methods must continually change and [so must] the way we present our message to each new generation. This includes our style of music, dress, communication and leadership. This is not compromise but an essential part of being relevant to our culture.

“Churches that refuse to change will eventually shrivel up or die and be increasingly irrelevant in their communities. Churches that are willing to change will have an increasing impact .”

Conner believes Australia is at a crossroads as it grapples with its own identity.

“This provides a wonderful opportunity for the Christian church. The church is all about expressing faith, offering hope and experiencing the love that is found in Jesus Christ,” he says.

Cartledge is similarly optimistic about the future. “The Australian church is headed toward impact on the whole nation. We’re going to the next level of growth and evangelistic focus. I believe this will escalate until there is no part of national life that is not challenged by the ministry of these churches.”

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Going for the Gold

As thousands of tourists with Olympic fever flood the streets of Sydney, Australia, this month, they will be met by a legion of street evangelists on a quest to help them find a prize much higher than the coveted gold medal—salvation in Christ. Youth With a Mission (YWAM) is sending teams of young

Christian missionaries from around the world, who have already begun to arrive in Australia to share Jesus with the multitudes of visitors the September Games will attract.

Australians, however, have no intention of being outdone. Quest Australia, a Sydney-based coordinating body for Christian outreach, has sifted through applications from more than 500 churches and many other Christian organizations wanting to use the opportunity to witness during the Olympics. Linking with the Sydney Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) and local authorities, Quest's army of volunteers helps strategize their impact.

Festivals are a key component to the outreach. They are driven by Awakening 2000, which grew from the dismay of Christians at the

banishment of prayer from the 1988 opening of Australia's

new Parliament House. Awakening's community festivals will run in towns along the Olympic torch route and in locations around Sydney.

"We share the gospel around Aussie parables," says Awakening's Dave

Mitchell. "For example, we've used the story of Simpson, a man who gave his life for his friends in World War I." John Simpson Kirkpatrick is an Australian icon. For three weeks of trench warfare, until he was killed in 1915, he used donkeys to rescue wounded men from the battlefield—a sacrificial parallel to the gospel.

With crowds of the magnitude expected during the Games, there are a multitude of transportation issues to be handled. Christian performing artists will help diffuse the rush for

trains and buses by presenting gospel drama and music. Among them will be YWAM's Ceifa ("harvest" in Portuguese) team from Brazil, which has given a year to prepare for and finance the trip to Sydney. Formed in 1988, they are top evangelism and creative arts performers who, in a recent campaign in northern Brazil, saw 50,000 come to Christ.

"We raised up intercessors for the whole time we have here," says

Paolo Santos, team leader of Ceifa. "Some of the dances and dramas have been specially created for Australia. We aim to bless this nation."

YWAM has been active at every Olympics since Munich, Germany, in 1972. Its vision for this year is Oz 2000: Gateway to the Nations. Though it focuses on Sydney, it aims to make full use of the Games opportunity,

touching all of Australia with its international teams' ministry—and then it's on to the Asia-Pacific region.

A major task for Quest has been to find host homes for athletes' families. "The Olympic committee has acknowledged that for an athlete to have their family with them is a big

advantage," says Quest's Amanda Bruder, "but most of their families can't afford to come." To address this, Quest aims to open 1,500 Christian homes to provide accommodations. Bruder says applications are pouring in.

Predictably, Quest has found even greater interest in sports ministry. "Churches take on the brief of organizing 20 kids to participate in a sports clinic," says Quest worker Louise Heinrich. "They'll be trained by skilled coaches with the idea

of reaching out into their communities, so kids are not only taught the sport, but also sportsmanlike attitudes and behavior. Bible societies are backing that, providing each participant with a good news gospel."

Most denominations have task forces to oversee their projects. The Baptist Church is funding a tent city to accommodate 3,000 incoming Christian workers—eight to a tent—with meals provided.

But what of the athletes themselves? Quest is providing 10 experienced sports ministry chaplains to the Olympic Village. Though there will be no proselytizing, Amanda Bruder expects there will be deep needs. "The percentage of winners is very small," she says, "so there's going to be a lot of people who are hurting—not just the athletes, but coaches and people attached to the athletes, their families and friends as well. So I think the chaplains will be doing a lot of pastoral care."

All these missionary groups believe Sydney 2000 is God's choice. "I think Sydney's a key battleground," says YWAM national director Steve Ahern. "The local churches are getting excited about evangelism with all these international teams coming. We want to encourage everybody that Sydney is a holy city that we need to bless—like Jerusalem."

Miracles in the Outback

Reports of signs and wonders among the Aborigines are filtering in from remote areas of the Australian desert.

The great monolith of Ayers Rock—Uluru in tribal

language—rises out of the central Australian desert, shimmering like a red phantom in the heat. When Max Wiltshire sights the mountainous landmark, he turns south for the remaining 50 miles of his journey. He's on his way to Rocket Bore, a stretch of wilderness that is home to one of the country's tribal Aboriginal groups and some 600 miles from Wiltshire's base, Halls Creek, located in the Kimberley Mountains of western Australia.

Wiltshire and his wife, Beatrice, went to Halls Creek in 1982 as missionaries to the outback. Halls Creek was a town of 600, ravaged by alcohol and occult activities, but with a hunger for truth.

"We had revival," Wiltshire told Charisma. "Inside of 12 months we were running 300 people in our meetings—half the town's population. So out of that we

[branched] out into other places and other workers came in. Today there are 10 churches in the Kimberley region."

These works span an area the size of Kansas with an indigenous population of around 20,000. But, like Rocket Bore, there are other remote areas Wiltshire feels he must visit. He tells of tribespeople carrying the gospel to desert settlements such as Bijidanga, Uumbulgarry and Nullagine.

Many of the revival fires in these regions are burning strong. But the mention of Nullagine prompts Wiltshire to point out that theological differences have, at times, caused problems. "[I called] our guy in that area," says Wiltshire. "I said, 'What's happening at Nullagine?' He said, 'There's only two who haven't been saved yet.'

“But,” says Wiltshire, naming two denominations that conducted the revival meetings, “they had no doctrine to back [what was happening] up. Our guy had a meeting with them and he tried to teach, but they [came] against his doctrine. Not only don’t [some denominations] have the doctrine to support the evidence—quite often, they will talk against the doctrine that would support it. The Nullagine revival is finished, and it only started two years ago.”

Nonetheless, miracles among the spiritually sensitive indigenous people are common. Wiltshire has recorded eight resurrections, among them a Halls Creek woman. “Our people knew she was admitted to [the] hospital, so that night they had a meeting, and prayer was called for her. But they didn’t know—as they were going into the meeting—that she’d died and was certified dead. When they were praying for her she was already in the mortuary.”

The following morning, a nurse found the woman at the mortuary door. “I’m cold,” she told the nurse. “I’ve been here all night without clothes.”

Wiltshire also tells of “Claudie B,” a huge man previously feared for his drunken rages. “In his police records,” says Wiltshire, “there’s a after it, it says ‘saved.’ That’s how much it impacted [everyone]. They used to have to send four policemen to arrest him. For these last 14 years, that man has faithfully served God.”

Reaching the Party Crowd

In some of Australia’s hottest nightclubs you won’t find just alcohol, lewd dancing and cheap pickup lines. You’ll find

Jesus.

“An evangelistic commando effort into the dark zones of Melbourne” is how pastor Dave Patmore describes his church’s forays into the city’s nightclub scene. He and his band of guerrilla evangelists regularly take the gospel to places most church people would feel awkward entering and try to avoid. In the midst of the clamor, the smoke and the alcohol of Melbourne’s

clubs, they mingle, start conversations and tell people about Jesus.

One of their most successful outreaches to date took place on Saturday nights from October 1997 through most of 1998, when the group would cover themselves in prayer and set off for Monsoons—a popular nighttime hot spot in Melbourne where singer David Jaanz, one of the city’s top entertainers, performed regularly.

“We’d pray for people. We saw people come to the Lord on multiple occasions. We were seeing people get healed,” Patmore says.

Jaanz, who had been at Monsoons for almost 10 years, had become a Christian a few months earlier; so he welcomed Patmore’s desire to witness there. Then, for no apparent reason, Jaanz’s residency at the club was terminated. Patmore believes it was due to spiritual resistance.

Jaanz took time off from performing to develop his Jaanz Schools of Singing. He had been teaching for nine years, but he sensed God was placing a new emphasis on this aspect of his career. So he dedicated his schools to bringing singers and

entertainers to Christ.

God began bringing him Christian teachers. "It had nothing to do with me," Jaanz told Charisma. God brought the right people in at the right time. Ninety percent of our teachers are Christians."

Decorating the walls of Jaanz's studio are posters of former students, such as Tina Arena and Peter Andre, who have become big names in Aussie entertainment. The potential of sharing the gospel with future stars is enormous, and many of the schools' students have been saved.

"We've seen some amazing things," Jaanz says. "We've had manifestations of God in our classes. We've felt wind, we've felt rain falling in the middle of class, the manifestation of gold dust on people's hands. We just stop in the middle of class and pray for people. We've seen some great miracles."

Jaanz runs three schools in Melbourne and others in Sydney and Brisbane, with a total student attendance of more than 1,000. He has plans for new schools in Adelaide and New Zealand. On Sundays he runs Silvers—a nighttime hot spot where he expands his witness.

Meanwhile, Patmore's church has started a café nightclub of its own. Planet Heaven opened in January 1999 and operates as a

talent quest for the music industry, in which Patmore formerly worked.

He selects judges for the shows from contacts he has retained.

Judges, entertainers and audience members all are targeted for evangelism by the church.

Patmore reports many coming to Christ, but he isn't satisfied yet. He believes that this is just the beginning and that the night will be reclaimed for Christ.